



Kereopa Te Rau – the photographer overtraced the moko in a failed attempt to make him look more ferocious.

Witness for the defence

Peter Wells' investigation of the deaths of missionary Carl Völkner and "The Eye Eater" drew him into a labyrinth. **by SALLY BLUNDELL**

It is hard, says writer and film-maker Peter Wells, "to think of a sadder image in the whole of 19th-century New Zealand photography".

The photograph is that of Kereopa Te Rau of Ngati Rangiwewehi, an early follower of the Pai Marire (or

Hauhau) religious movement, the subject of terrifying tales of savagery, a manhunt, a murder conviction. To do justice to the reputation, Napier photographer and soon-to-be-mayor Samuel Carnell overtraced the moko, a "crude imposition", writes Wells in his new book, *Journey to a Hanging*, but a

failed one. Instead of a ferocious cannibal, we see "a sad man trapped before a camera".

A month after the photograph was taken, on January 5, 1872, Te Rau was dead, hanged in the yard of Napier Prison.

Journey to a Hanging exhumes the events surrounding two hangings. The first, in

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1865, is that of German-born missionary Carl Sylvius Völkner. Pious, hardworking, undoubtedly naive, he joined the Church Missionary Society in 1852, working first as a lay teacher, then – in Opotiki among the iwi Te Whakatohea – as an ordained minister.

The 1860s were not a good time for missionaries. As well as isolation, poor resources and an alarming rate of desertion and mental illness (Völkner's wife, Emma, apparently went mad), the sudden escalation of the Land Wars posed uncomfortable questions about their role among Maori. Were they working on behalf of their flock? Or for the colonial administration? Völkner argued that missionaries should not be associated with British soldiers. Not long after, however, he wrote to Governor Grey, claiming that as there were no government agents in the district, "I should be wanting in my duty to you, if I did not make known to you what happens around me." He "humbly but earnestly" requested that any such communications remain secret. Later reports suggest Marist missionary Joseph Garavel told Te Whakatohea that Völkner had the ear of the governor, so fuelling the iwi's suspicions that Völkner was spying for the Government.

Te Whakatohea were initially reluctant to become embroiled in the spreading Kingite movement, but in early 1864, they and other Bay of Plenty iwi decided to join the Waikato tribes. (Völkner was adamant that Garavel, in delivering a letter inviting Te Whakatohea to "join Waikato and drive away the Pakehas", was responsible for their involvement in the war.) The result was a humiliating defeat at the hands of Te Arawa and the death of Te Whakatohea chief Te Aporotanga.

By then, too, an influenza epidemic had swept through the Te Whakatohea population and food was in short supply.

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Within this tinderbox scenario, Te Rau – his wife and two daughters recently killed presumably by British troops – and fellow prophet Patara Raukauri arrived on an ecclesiastical journey as directed by Pai Marire founder Te Ua Haumene.

Völkner, in Auckland at the time, was

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advised not to return to Opotiki. He ignored the advice.

"He wanted to go back because he thought his people [Te Whakatohea] were suffering," says Wells. "And he had medicine. It was one of those tragic mistakes when he thought he was needed and it fulfilled his understanding of the role of the missionary."



Carl Völkner, photographed by fellow clergyman John Kinder around 1859.

On arriving at Opotiki on March 1, he and fellow missionary Thomas Grace were immediately captured. Following a night of "madness" and "phrenzy", Völkner was hanged from a willow tree beside Hiona, the church he so proudly built. His body was decapitated, his eyes apparently eaten by Te Rau, his head prepared for moko makai (ritualistic preservation) and his body thrown to the dogs, then consigned to an outdoor toilet.

The media threw themselves at the "savage and brutal" murder – never before had a Christian missionary been killed on New Zealand soil. It was, the *Napier Daily Telegraph* declared, "the most atrocious murder recorded in the pages of history". In July

that year, Völkner's killing was mentioned in 32 British newspapers. Wells quotes writer-historian Edmund Bohan saying the killing put race relations in this country "back by more than a century".

Underlying the outrage was a collective fear of Pai Marire fanaticism, an apparent return to an older, more brutal world of shrunken heads and ceremonial cannibalism at a time, writes Wells on his extensive blog, "of railways and global travel, of chloroform and corsets".

For anyone growing up in the 1950s and 60s, he says, the Völkner story was a fable people knew, "like an eruption of deepest darkest cannibalism. It was the most frightening thing you could possibly imagine."

COLD CASE

Within the year four Maori, including Te Whakatohea chief Mokomoko, were arrested and executed and close to 202,000ha of tribal land confiscated. But it took another six years for "Kaiwhatu" (The Eye Eater), hiding out in Tuhoe territory, to be caught, handed over to Ngati Porou chief Ropata Wahawaha and Captain Thomas Porter and brought to Napier.

By then the trail was cold, witnesses hard to find – an extraordinary ellipsis, says Wells, in an event involving so many people. In desperation, the Crown offered a pardon to anyone who could prove a case against "the tiu" (the Jew)

Kereopa. Eyewitnesses were paid. A list of potential witnesses proffered by Te Rau was ignored, as was his request to be tried in Opotiki. Rather, he was to be tried in Napier, described at the time as a "tattle-mongering, back-biting, altogether piously minded community" (and a community still rattled by the shadow of Ringatu leader and repeat escapee Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki).

It was, writes Wells, an "astonishing and astonishingly bare-faced" push for a guilty verdict.

In a lengthy essay entitled "Fiat Justitia" – published in the *Hawke's Bay Herald* and as a pamphlet – printer, botanist and former missionary William Colenso argued for leniency and the abandonment of the "show trial". Described by Wells as "a marathon of logic and argument", the article described Pai Marire as a serious movement rooted in

loss of land, control and power and aimed at wresting Old Testament Christianity out of the hands of a European church increasingly associated with land confiscations. And surely Völkner's death, Colenso argued, had already been "amply avenged".

In his own defence, Te Rau, speaking obliquely, allegorically, biblically, said the decision to kill Völkner was made before he arrived in Opotiki, on the basis of Te Whakatohea's recent war and the death of Aporotanga. He did not mention Völkner's alleged spying or the killing of his own relatives. And although he – and several witnesses – said he wasn't even present at the hanging, he did admit to agreeing to it. He said he only "pretended" to eat the eyes – an out-and-out lie, says Wells or "desperate apostasy".

Justice Alexander Johnston was unconvinced. In his conclusion to the trial, on December 21, 1871, he ordered the jury to ignore suggestions that the crimes were part of a "political scheme for the vindication of a downtrodden people" and any other speculations of an "ethical or sentimental nature". It was not even necessary, he said, to prove the accused was the chief instigator of the killing to determine his guilt.

The verdict came quickly. Kereopa Te Rau was guilty of wilful murder and sentenced to death by hanging.

Was he the right man? That, says Wells, is a hard question.

"Kereopa probably did whip people up into a state of frenzy, but there is no real evidence he was present at the actual hanging. A lot of hearsay but not a lot of witnesses – it was this weird thing when no one was actually looking at the time of the hanging, which I don't believe for a moment."

And with so many actors it was unclear as to who did what. "Like the hanging of Mussolini or the killing of Saddam Hussein," he writes, "these were crowd events, a tumult of people carried along by a wave of emotion."

Three weeks later, on January 5, after a final night beleaguered by an unholy battle over his soul between the Anglican (Bishop William Williams) and the Catholic (Sister Mary Joseph Aubert) churches, Te Rau was hanged. His body was placed in a cheap coffin of kahikatea and placed on the dray of an ordinary wagon – "a cart you might

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deliver milk from, or meat" – to be taken along a bumpy, dusty country road to Otatara Pa near Taradale in a haze of unanswered questions and inconclusive findings.

PERSONAL HISTORY

The story, says Wells, is incredibly complex. "I walked into a labyrinth and the labyrinth had many more corridors than I thought."



An 1870s photograph shows a group gathered at the tree from which Völkner was hanged.

And incredibly dramatic, from the bevy of telegraphs whistling up and down the island, giving a blow-by-blow account of the Government's handling of the whole event, to the pathos of a vilified prophet bumping down the road to an uncertain burial ground (some say close to Waiohiki marae near Taradale, others say in Tuwharetoa territory near Taupo).

"I was interested in William Colenso and the whole drama of [Te Rau's] final days with Bishop Williams and Sister Aubert. It appealed to me as a novelist almost more than as a historian – for a while I thought I could make it into a novel or a play."

But in writing *The Hungry Heart: Journeys with William Colenso* (2011), Wells found

a way of talking that "was like a personal address to history, less formal than history writing, and I could marry some of the informality of the essay form to looking at history, putting in personal thoughts and uncertainties".

It is these reflections, the tiny details of place, even the landscape photographs he took, that bring the story into a "contemporary focus".

"It parallels the past with the present and that is what we need to do with history. The whole thing of history being past and dead is so wrong – we are still living out the consequences of it."

On his blog, another way of "talking about the subject to a general audience", Wells describes *Journey to a Hanging* as a book about gaps, "the gaps between what we too blithely accept as the true story of the past and its actual complex reality ... I came to understand I was writing a book that looked at the ruins in the reputation of two men."

The reputation of "poor Völkner" has faded – in 1988 he was stripped of his martyr status. In 1992 Mokomoko was granted a full acquittal and this year, buried within the Ngati Rangiwewehi Claims Settlement Bill, was an official pardon of Kereopa Te Rau for his role in the death of Reverend Völkner. As Wells writes, Te Rau is "The Eye Eater" no more. "He is just another victim of colonialism."

But if we are to mourn for Te Rau, he says, "we must mourn for Carl Sylvius too". To draw a line under the whole drama, Wells believes Völkner's head should be returned and buried with his body in Hiona Church (renamed the Church of St Stephen the Martyr after Völkner's death, now called Hiona-St Stephens) in Opotiki. According to reports of the time, the head was ceremonially handed over to Te Heuheu of Tuwharetoa but what happened to it after this, he says, we do not yet know.

"Shame might have stopped people talking about it and perhaps that oral history is lost. But it would be a generous act, it would complete the act of justice. We are all trapped in history, and with war there is no innocence, but you have to try to look at that history with a sense of forgiveness."